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ABSTRACT

The standardization of second language proficiency levels for university students in Germany is discussed. Problems with the current system, in which each university has developed its own program of study and proficiency certification, are examined and a framework for development of a unified language certificate for all universities is outlined. Major features of the proposal include the following: (1) independent language programs taught by professional language teachers, on normal contracts, within university language schools or departments; (2) qualifications at three levels of achievement, equivalent to three successive stages of instruction of about 150 instructional hours each; (3) languages-for-special-purposes options of about 80 instructional hours at the third (highest) level; and (4) certification at levels one and two based on course completion, and certification at level three by separate oral and written examinations. Each of these features is examined in greater detail. The status of the proposal in the process of national acceptance among institutions is noted briefly. (MSE)

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"UNICERT®", or: TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A UNIFIED LANGUAGE CERTIFICATE FOR GERMAN UNIVERSITIES

0. The impending implementation, by 1992, of an effectual common market without any restrictions or control between the member states of the European Community has greatly stimulated public interest in the language learning and teaching needs within a United Europe of many cultures and tongues.

It has amongst other things given substantial support to the long-standing claim of the universities that in this day and age a university education without the opportunity, perhaps even the obligation, of learning one or more foreign languages to a useful degree of competence is incomplete and incompatible with the demands that present and future graduates will have to meet, both in the context of university education itself and in their later professional lives.

Universities in the Federal Republic have over the years developed their own individual traditions of making more or less extensive language learning opportunities available, within the framework of existing courses of study, or, more frequently, outside it, as additional offers.

However, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs. While a clear pattern has emerged for courses in the philologies (modern and classical languages) to include substantial compulsory language learning requirements, study courses combining a philological and a non-philological subject are extremely rare (outside teacher education), and non-philological study courses (e.g. law, business administration, sociology, computer science) assigning more than a token number of course hours to the learning of a foreign language are rarer still. Thus, although the importance of learning foreign languages in higher education has become increasingly recognized and accepted, in practice students still tend to be faced with the choice of either studying a foreign language as a philological subject (which leads to a qualification in philology no matter what other subjects are taken) or of studying something else and catering for their language needs in their own time, outside the official study programme, with very limited possibilities of counting any hours invested here against the compulsory hours of their main study course programme and, perhaps more important, without even receiving a recognized language qualification at the end.

There are two rather problematic consequences of this situation. The first is that relegating the language learning needs of non-philologists to the non-mandatory fringe of activities a university may, but does not have to, offer its members makes meeting these needs appear as a potentially dispensable luxury: in any money squeeze, these are in fact the first courses to go, since they are additional to the compulsory programmes rather than integral parts of them. The second, and closely connected, consequence is that under these circumstances it is next to impossible to design and implement meaningful, well-structured and result-oriented language teaching programmes extending over more than a financial year. Since not many useful language learning aims are accessible in one year of (less than) part-time study, the vicious circle implied in this situation is of course fully operative: If not many useful aims can be reached by the courses usually run, losing language courses appears to be no great loss to the institution concerned.

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In recent years, a number of (especially newer) universities have started to try to remedy this situation by institutionalising independant language study course programmes of various lengths and aims and by creating language certificates based on the results of language examinations taken at the end of such course programmes. While these efforts definitely constitute steps in the right direction, understandably enough the certificates thus created reflect the course programmes and aims of particular institutions only. Since course programmes show a great (and fairly arbitrary) diversity of entrance requirements, lengths, orientations, and examination requirements, the certificates thus obtained by students are in practice impossible to evaluate accurately and are consequently of little practical value to the holder.

It is with this problem in mind that the AKS (Arbeitskreis der Sprachenzentren; Association of Language Centres) has for some time now been campaigning for the development of a framework for a unified language certificate for all German universities (to be dubbed UNICERT®). A final decision on the eventual format of this framework was taken recently[1], and moves for its implementation are now being made.

In what follows we will (1) present the major features of this framework, (2) discuss some of the issues involved in its inception and eventual shape, (3) draw attention to some of the problems of the proposed scheme, and (4) outline the next steps to be taken in this undertaking as well as its expected backwash on the language teaching and certification at German universities.

1. The development of a framework for a unified language certificate for all German universities must be seen against the background of the strong, constitutionally guaranteed and jealously guarded cultural and educational autonomy of the ***Länder*** (states) making up the Federal Republic, on the one hand, and the administrative and academic independence of the institutions of Higher Education within them, on the other. While the resultant diversity is for many purposes no doubt a rather attractive feature of German universities, it has meant in the language teaching field that there is no tradition of cooperation, to the degree of e.g. establishing common course programmes and/or ascertaining comparable levels of achievement or proficiency, even between neighbouring universities. Each institution operates very much on its own and must already be considered quite successful if it can offer coherent language teaching programmes for non-philologists extending over more than an individual course or two.

Only in the area of "German as a Foreign Language" have there been successful attempts to achieve some degree of cooperation in ascertaining language proficiency, between the various German universities, in that in 1972 the ***Westdeutsche Rektorenkonferenz*** (Conference of Principals of West German Universities) formulated a language proficiency requirement[2] for foreign students intending to study at a German university. Obviously, in spite of the traditional autonomy of universities to decide on their own affairs some degree of comparability of demands, as admission requirement, was desirable to avoid prospective foreign students being attracted in large numbers to some universities where such demands were perhaps easier to meet than at some others. What is interesting to note for the present purpose is that the Principals did not decide on a particular entry test, e.g. on a TOEFL test equivalent, perhaps to be administered nation-wide to all applicants at all universities. Rather, they formulated a framework or a set of guidelines recommended for adoption by the individual universities as the basis on which the latter would then in turn specify their own examination regulations[3]. In this way, they sidestepped the contentious issue of academic autonomy, and although the suggested framework was by necessity comparatively general, it went a long way towards

harmonizing the demands made for the same purpose (i.e. ascertaining adequate language proficiency for study at a German university) at different institutions.

This background may help to explain why the present development of a unified language certificate for German universities in languages other than German needed to model itself on the only successful, inter-institutionally accepted format of a language assessment procedure that German universities possess. Under present circumstances, only a similar general framework could be expected to find acceptance at national level, with the eventual details of implementation to be left to the individual institution.

The most important stipulations of the framework[4] now proposed can be summarised as follows:

(i) Independent language programmes are to be taught by professional language teachers, on normal contracts, within university institutions (sections, departments, schools or similar) professionally concerned with language teaching.

(ii) Independent language programmes are to lead to qualifications at three different levels of achievement. These are equivalent to three successive, self-contained stages of about 150 hours of teaching each, with each representing a worthwhile goal.

(iii) Level 3 is to provide for "language for special purposes" options with a time share of about 80 hours each.

(iv) For levels 1 and 2, certificates are to be issued on the basis of the successful completion of the contributing courses. The certificate for level 3 is to be issued on the basis of a separate examination. This examination is to have a written and an oral part, both of which must be passed: there is to be no compensatory effect between the two. The oral part is to be designed to assess the candidate's ability to handle complex face-to-face interaction including demanding productive and receptive information processing. The written part is to be designed to assess, amongst other things, the candidate's ability to produce adequate texts in the foreign language, according to instructions. Both parts will have a bias towards a particular sphere of reference if a "special purpose" option is chosen.

These, rather modest, proposals in effect formulate some basic demands that must be met if foreign language teaching is to be taken more seriously at German universities than is often at present the case. They try to provide a general set of guidelines for independent practical language learning and teaching programmes that lead to comparable results between institutions of Higher Education and that students of any academic subject(s) should be offered as possible qualifications additional to their main study courses. They are not meant to compete with integrated language teaching programmes (as far as they exist) which tend to have a very close relationship between the type of language training provided and the area studied (e.g. legal terminology for students of law; see also discussion below). Nor are they meant to interfere with existing independent programmes that might, in individual cases, go far beyond the scope envisaged, and level achieved, here.

2. For a discussion of these guidelines it may be convenient to follow the four points in which the proposals have been summarized above.

2.1 The first point of the summary reiterates the truism that without professional language teachers and without institutional frameworks professionally concerned with language teaching universities are unlikely to be able to provide

efficient and result-oriented language teaching. Good language teaching cannot be expected from persons and institutions whose main qualifications and interests lie elsewhere. Institutions that relegate the task of meeting their language teaching needs to some purely administrative office and to teachers hired by the hour and fired as disposable quantities whenever the annual budgetary wind changes are doing themselves, and their students, a great disservice.

2.2 The second point of the proposal takes its point of departure from the notion of a comprehensive, meaningful language teaching programme and suggests a subdivision into three stages or levels of about 150 hours of teaching each. On the assumption that on average students engaged in full-time university study cannot afford to invest much more than one course per semester in additional areas such as language learning, this means that they will be able to cover a maximum of two of these stages before they graduate after 4 years of study. In a language started from zero, 150 hours of learning/teaching should lead to a useful level of basic communicative abilities and should be sufficient to allow learners to continue on their own. Interestingly, in institutions where something like the proposed scheme is already in operation the experience is that quite a few learners in fact prefer at that stage to broaden their background of qualifications by starting to learn another language up to this level rather than to continue with the first language up to level 2 (which would aim at a fairly high and flexible language command and be adequate for most social and professional needs). Level 3, in turn, aims at a markedly higher level of flexibility, accuracy and adequacy, including the necessary degree of social and cultural awareness, demanding a thorough familiarity with the language in a range of social and professional contexts. Obviously, for time reasons level 3 would only be attainable on the basis of some substantial previous knowledge of the language, e.g. brought from school, and would in the Federal Republic in practice be restricted to English and, in some cases, French.

The scheme then offers meaningful goals at three different levels. It easily accommodates the fact that universities are not able, nor need to, offer every conceivable language at all three levels. As suggested above, level 3 courses would only be needed in English and French, in most institutions. A variety of languages could be offered at level 1, with a certain number of them also being made available at level 2. Decisions here would depend on demand, on institutional language policies such as encouraging the learning of less frequently studied languages or of concentrating on particular groups of languages, and, of course, on institutional constraints such as the availability of personnel. In fact, the probable differences in the language learning opportunities provided by the universities following this scheme would effectively, and legitimately, contribute to the individual profile of the institution concerned.

Put negatively, the scheme implies, quite intentionally to be sure, that incidental offers of 2 or 3 hours of e.g. Chinese or Russian which are not part of a larger language teaching programme spanning a number of semesters and leading to well-defined, meaningful aims are a waste of time, money and energy. The scheme in fact asks institutions to concentrate their efforts on languages and levels that they can cover effectively, rather than to indulge in window-dressing by pretending to offer a deceptively wide range of languages in what in a great number of cases turn out to be once-off courses. Studying current university prospectuses in the Federal Republic will show quickly that this point needs making.

2.3 The third stipulation of the new framework refers to the "language for special purposes" issue. It is quite clear that as a general tendency the language learning programmes created under the new scheme will be concerned

with general language proficiency rather than with e.g. the language of electronic engineering, computer science, or law. The latter would imply language teaching where a large part of the academic course contents would have to be transported in the foreign language if it was to be taken seriously, and would more appropriately be the domain of language learning programmes integrated into the study of a particular academic discipline rather than being offered independently and outside it, which is after all the field envisaged here.

This does not mean, of course, that language courses with a general orientation, i.e. without explicit concentration on the language of a particular field of scientific enquiry, are of no practical value for the academic learner. On the contrary, (future) academics learning a foreign language for professional purposes need to an equal degree, if not even to a greater one, the ability to interact, i.e. to establish and maintain contacts with colleagues and customers abroad. This demands largely general, social and cultural language skills characteristic of educated people in general. Students of any academic discipline taking part in general language courses (e.g. at level 3, in a language like English) are therefore learning something valuable in its own right and extremely useful for their later professional lives, and are not being fobbed off with a second-rate programme.

It should perhaps also be borne in mind that a good general command of a language is likely to enable a learner to pick up the technical language of his/her discipline comparatively easily and quickly by him/herself, whereas the reverse process is much less easy (and successful) without overt teaching.

The emphasis on the general, rather than the subject-specific, side of proficiency in a foreign language as aimed at under the present scheme does not, on the other hand, exclude optional specialisations, or orientations towards particular spheres of reference, where these can be offered. Anticipating future professional uses of a foreign language including the spheres of reference implied in the studies undertaken by the leaners is not only a powerful motivational tool, but also a potentially important aspect of a learner's language training. But this needs to be seen as being different from "the language of a particular discipline", which is sometimes - too narrowly, we believe - equated with the ability to understand the scientific literature in the foreign language and to formulate scientific papers (the latter usually in English). To illustrate, for German students of law to learn about English law in English (although no doubt useful) would be outside the scope of the present framework; to learn how to rephrase legal texts such as documents, contracts, guarantee conditions or newspaper reports on legal matters orally or in writing so that a customer (or some other non-lawyer) can understand them could well be part of a conceivable specialisation inside it. Similarly, for German students of business administration to learn about economic thinking in the USA in English (although again no doubt useful) would be outside the scope of what the present scheme is intended to offer; learning negotiation and conference techniques in the foreign language would no doubt again be a potential specialisation inside it.

It was necessary to explain what is apparently meant by the distinction between "teaching the language of a discipline" and "teaching discipline-oriented language" (although the dividing line may not always be sharp and easy to draw) to see the provision made for "language for special purposes" options in point 3 of the summary in proper perspective. The guidelines suggest that specialisations of this sort, if they are offered at all, should be substantial (80 hours, out of a total of 150) and should be reserved to level 3.

While the first of these two points makes a lot of obvious sense, the second is in fact fairly arbitrary. The idea is apparently to offer specialisations only on the basis of a reasonable general command of a language. This would quite

sensibly rule out specialisations at level 1, but there is no reason why at level 2 specialisations should not be conceivable.

2.4 It is only the fourth point of the summary of the new guidelines that makes explicit reference to the certificate itself. This is not really surprising since the initiative to create a unified language certificate for German universities was undoubtedly primarily motivated by the badly needed backwash effect hopefully improving the present conditions for language learning and teaching at most German institutions of Higher Education, rather than by a particularly intensive interest in language testing as such.

The guidelines suggest that levels 1 and 2 can be certified without an explicit examination, conceivably because teachers might baulk at having to shoulder the workload of two additional sets of corrections. Institutions are of course free to set their own examinations for these levels if they so wish. The level 3 certificate, on the other hand, can only be obtained after an examination containing an oral and a written part both of which must be passed. The stipulation that there should be no compensatory effect between the two can be seen as an attempt to upgrade the weight of the (traditionally neglected) oral side of the language command of a candidate who cannot be awarded the certificate on the strength of the written part alone if the oral part is not at least a pass.

In keeping with the guideline approach to the language certificate, the actual formats of the oral and written parts have been left to the discretion of the individual institution, to be specified by local examination regulations. The discussions during the preparatory stages of the scheme showed that considerable differences can in fact be expected, amongst others, in the implementation of the oral interview (e.g. degree of guidance given), for the oral part, or in the in/exclusion of the translation, for the written.

3 The present stage of development of a unified language certificate for German universities is undoubtedly an important step forward in an effort to improve the language teaching offered by German universities to students of all disciplines, more and more of whom consider mastery of one or even more foreign languages an essential addition to their university qualification. The scheme, with its structure of three levels each constituting a worthwhile goal, with its provision for a certain degree of specialisation if appropriate resources are available, with its balance of oral and written skills in the certificate examination and with its attempt to keep the administration manageable, is internally consistent, transparent and easy to operate. It should be very attractive for institutions which do not yet meet the modest requirements stipulated, and is likely to be adopted (possibly in addition) also in institutions that have already been running other language teaching schemes, in the past.

However, the scheme also raises a number of questions which focus on problems such as the suitability of the scheme for all languages, the exact nature of the relationship between language of a subject and subject-related language (i.e. syllabus design), the wisdom of attempting to create a new language testing scheme in the face of established competitors, and the justifiability of the comparability claim.

The suggested structure of three stages or levels applicable to all languages taught looks neat, but may not be capable of handling the considerable differences in proficiency that one needs to expect e.g. at level 3 from learners doing English (with 7 to 9 years of school English before they start) as opposed to, say, Spanish (started at university from zero). Experience will have to show whether a problem really exists - it was suggested earlier that learners are unlikely to reach level 3 if starting from zero -, but it certainly looks somewhat

unlikely that the entry level reached after 300 hours of language learning at university (levels 1 and 2 in Spanish, in our example) should really be equivalent to 9 years of language learning at school (English).

The problem of the relationship of "the language of the subject" and "subject-related language" is probably rather more complex than has been suggested in earlier parts of this paper. The filling of the subject-oriented hours of the (optional) specialisations is at present still fairly vague and as a result the same certificate, given the diversity of possible implementations, would certify rather different qualifications to the learners concerned. Model syllabuses would be required as soon as practicable to give specialisations a more secure footing (see also chapter 4 below).

The whole attempt of developing a language certificate for German universities immediately raises the question whether this is not in fact re-inventing the wheel, since there are a number of established proficiency tests that have proven their worth and might be considered suitable for the same purpose. However, it was felt that external schemes might not sufficiently reflect what was and what was not possible in the context of German institutions of Higher Education. Also, most existing proficiency testing schemes cater for particular languages only. Finally, for the reasons outlined at the beginning, the adoption of a complete, ready-made test from whichever source would apparently be incompatible with the susceptibilities of the German education system and would therefore have no chance of influencing the present situation in language teaching at universities except in individual instances. The present scheme then needs to be seen as a compromise trying to find the best solution possible under real-life conditions.

The biggest problem, of course, is the question of comparability of results, which after all was one of the motivating factors behind the inception of the whole scheme. While one can appreciate that a framework consisting of general guidelines leaving the implementation to the institutions concerned is perhaps the only practicable way of making any progress, the inevitable diversity in the eventual assessment formats makes the reliability of comparisons rather doubtful. Experience (and research, see chapter 4 below) will have to show whether this is in practice quite so serious as it looks. The experience with the PNdS-examination, on which as suggested earlier the present scheme is modelled and which also leaves the implementation of the examination details to the individual universities, gives cause for the hope that the problem might be less acute than it seems, for there are no droves of foreign students switching from one university to another hoping to succeed in one if they failed in another: It seems that in practice about the same level is in fact being attested no matter where the examination is taken.

4 The present stage of the development of a language certificate for German universities, at which a great number of institutions of Higher Education have discussed and accepted the proposals outlined here, must be seen as a first step which needs to be followed by others of equal importance.

The proposal is now being channelled, as one of the next steps, to the Principals' Conference for adoption, and preliminary talks have signalled that acceptance is not improbable.

In addition, a bundle of interconnected projects is being prepared to monitor the scheme. This entails the formulation of model implementations of the guidelines, the design of model syllabuses for the course programmes (in particular the specialisation options), the development of model examination tasks for various levels and languages, and the harmonization of marking schemes. A second area for the monitoring projects will be concerned with the provision of

scorer training and advisory services. The third area will be the monitoring of the results (when they start being available) as they compare between different languages at the same institution, between the same languages at different institutions and, of course, against results obtained in other, established language tests. Only on the background of efforts in these directions can the new scheme gradually work its way towards living up to its own claims.

If it is true, as suggested at the beginning, that in our present time without opportunities of learning at least one foreign language to a useful degree of competence no university education is complete or compatible with the demands that graduates will have to meet both at the university itself and in their later professional lives, every effort to improve the language teaching and learning conditions of our universities deserves all the support it can get. There is still a lot to be done, but the new scheme is an encouraging sign of badly needed progress in a sadly underrated field.

Annotations

1 at the recent AKS conference "Sprachen für Europa" (Languages for Europe) held 26 - 28 March 1990 at the University of Bochum

2 usually called PNdS (Prüfung zum Nachweis deutscher Sprachkenntnisse; examination as proof of proficiency in German) although the official title is "Rahmenordnung für die deutsche Sprachprüfung für Ausländische Studienbewerber an den Wissenschaftlichen Hochschulen der Bundesrepublik einschließlich Berlin (West)" (guidelines for the assessment of proficiency in German for foreign students applying for study at institutions of Higher Education in the Federal Republic including Berlin (West))

3 "Den Hochschulen wird empfohlen, auf der Grundlage dieser Rahmenordnung eine entsprechende Prüfungsordnung zu erlassen" Rahmenordnung für die deutsche Sprachprüfung ... p. 118 ("It is recommended that the universities pass appropriate examination regulations on the basis of these guidelines")

4 Rahmenordnung für eine studienbegleitende Fremdsprachenausbildung an Universitäten und Hochschulen, Bochum 27/3/1990 (guidelines for independent language learning programmes at institutions of Higher Education)

Literature

Rahmenordnung für die deutsche Sprachprüfung für Ausländische Studierende an den Wissenschaftlichen Hochschulen der Bundesrepublik einschließlich Berlin (West), Beschluß der 101. Westdeutschen Rektorenkonferenz, Bonn-Bad Godesberg 12.12.1072, reprinted in: Informationen DaF 6, 1981, 118-120

Rahmenordnung für eine studienbegleitende Fremdsprachenausbildung an Universitäten und Hochschulen, Bochum 27.3.1990 (mimeo)